

Affluence and Atheism: Is there a Correlation?

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This essay explores the view that some types of disbelief is related to a self-assurance and reliance in their affluence. It highlights the Qur'anic perspective on the correlation between the rejection faith and a false sense of self-sufficiency, and provides psycho-spiritual solutions to this malaise.

The Qur'an reveals an interesting exposition of some people's opposition to faith. It shows that the setting of wealth and children as benchmarks for success and stature can consequently act as impediments to effective engagement with the divine instructive. Such people are described as finding great security and self-assurance in their affluence, which can become a means for their religious and moral indifference:

“Never have We sent a warner to a community without those among them who were corrupted by wealth saying, ‘We do not believe in the message you have been sent with.’ They would say, ‘We have greater wealth and more children than you, and we shall not be punished.’”¹

The Qur'an furthermore details examples of human transgressions committed by peoples who felt ease and comfort in the habitats they had furnished for themselves. Whilst relishing in the splendour of their newfound opulence they exhibited a state of hubris that undercut their self-awareness and acknowledgement of the susceptibility and vulnerability of man in every space, setting and time he briefly occupies. The Qur'an questions,

“Do the people of these towns feel secure that Our punishment will not come upon them by day, while they are at play?”²

Connor Wood in his article, *Does Atheism Arise From Wealth* noted that “materially comfortable people have more energy to expend on negotiating their social worlds.”³ As Hugh McLeod has revealed the beginning of the leisure industry, of music halls, of “the multitude of political organisations and social clubs potentially replaced the church in many of its social functions.”⁴ There is a drawing together here of a newfound material comfort, of opportunity and the advancement of such social worlds. Secularists, unlike the religious, can be comfortable with ambiguous social roles, Wood argues, because they can afford to be.⁵ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has argued that “to the extent that most of one's psychic energy becomes invested in material goals, it is typical for sensitivity to other rewards to atrophy. Friendships, art, literature, natural beauty, religion and philosophy become less and less interesting.”⁶ Knowing what this generates in a person, i.e. how one might explain feelings that arise from safety and comfort generated by affluence and self-autonomy is a matter described in some detail in the Qur'an. The Qur'an anticipates behaviours congruent to attitudes and patterns of human behaviour, and in light of this article it draws on mental states from gluttony to grandiosity which arise out of feelings of self-sufficiency and privilege.

An interesting study by Nigel Barber provides evidence of a correlation between modes of ease and comfort people experience in life and an eventual disinclination to hold to a belief in a supreme, higher power.⁷ People's turning to religion, he argues, is tied to difficulties they experience in life. Undoubtedly, the facing of imminent dangers like risk of death can awaken vulnerability and dependence within a person. The Qur'an provides many examples of this human tendency. History, too, is replete with examples of communities that found solace in beseeching God in moments of crisis and in the attempt to make better sense of the crises to which they were exposed. Barber points out that in social democracies where there are less fears and uncertainties about the future and more agencies and institutions and social welfare programs which facilitate care and comfort for the vulnerable and which seek to mitigate risks of illness and early deaths this leads to people feeling more in control of their lives, and in turn feeling less in need of religion.⁸

In light of this, a decade of dramatic social and cultural change in the western world in relation to newfound social opportunities and their bearing on religion was the 1960s. The affluence of the 1960s had an instrumental effect on challenging existing social structures that afforded people a sense of belonging and identity and most people were able to enjoy what had previously been luxuries.⁹ These included social class, political allegiances and sectarian identities. The post-war decade was met with rapid rise in increasing incomes for large parts of Western-European households which drastically shifted the dynamics of social living, of access to mobility, of what 'community' meant, on access to credit. In turn, families were afforded more time to spend together at home. It became standard for families to enjoy time watching television together, to think about homeownership and as McLeod posits, for the "home to become a major source of identity and satisfaction."¹⁰ Though the initial burgeoning of social values systems in the home are a good thing, new ideals of freedom and individual self-fulfilment slowly began to see the rise of a more assertive and insubordinate youth, challenging existing social structures and being drawn to an ethos of individual freedom. From changes in clothing styles, hairstyles, to the taking of illegal drugs and a break from conventions of sexual morality and a relaxing of censorship in the media it was the church that was faced with major challenges in being able to relate to a generation now riding the tide of self-centred individualism. This was reflected in a big drop in baptisms.¹¹ Feminism too was soon to become a major social force as well as the movement for homosexual rights. Many began to leave the churches as Britain became a more permissive society.

Janel Eccles notes that the atheism which resurfaced during the cultural revolution – subsequent to the nineteenth-century influence of atheists Robert Owen, Charles Bradlaugh and later Bertrand Russell and A.J. Ayer (see also Bagg and Voas¹²) – had been dubbed 'humanism'. With the founding of the British Humanist Association (BHA) in 1967 atheist tendencies became more readily accepted, and this at a time of increasing affluence when employment prospects were strong and the British population had become far more independent and self-autonomous.¹³ St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton posit the following:

"The most important factor in weakening the influence of the churches is the centripetal pull of the urban milieu. There is a bewildering diversity of denominations and of types of churches within a denomination. The movies, ball games, social clubs and policy stations [illegal betting agencies] offer competing forms of participation, and throw doubt on all absolute conceptions of sin. The group controls of the small town are absent. The prosperous 'wicked' are a perpetual challenge to the 'poor saints'."¹⁴

Notwithstanding the newfound affluence of this period there were many other factors that might explain the waning religiosity. During this period large numbers of people lost the habit of regular religious worship¹⁵ and the previously 'Christian' societies had become largely pluralist societies.¹⁶ This accordingly resulted in a lack of homogeneity in beliefs and ethics.¹⁷ What the rise of affluence denotes is what Dutch sociologist, Leo Laeyendecker, in his study of *The Postwar Generation and Establishment Religion in the Netherlands*, termed the long-term process of modernisation. For many, especially young people, throwing off the restraints of Cold-War austerity was met with and embracing of a new hedonistic youth culture coupled with growing affluence.¹⁸

Caroline Gregoire has shown that psychologists who examine the influence of wealth and inequality on human behaviour have ascertained that wealth is able to powerfully influence our thoughts and actions in inadvertent ways, irrespective of one's economic circumstances.¹⁹ The Qur'an forewarns of the dangers present in mentally autonomising one's wealth and achievements – it not only warns of behavioural patterns of pride, arrogance and vanity which are likely to ensue but underscores the perils of ingratitude, delusion of self-grandiosity and disbelief which culminates. An example of such dangers is reflected in a powerful Qur'anic narrative in chapter 18 of an affluent individual who was given two beautiful gardens and a host of other niceties:

“Tell them the parable of two men: for one of them We made two gardens of grapevines, surrounded them with date palms, and put corn fields in between; both gardens yielded fruit and did not fail in any way; We made a stream flow through them, and so he had abundant fruit. One day, while talking to his friend, he said, ‘I have more wealth and a larger following than you.’ He went into his garden and wronged himself by saying, ‘I do not think this will ever perish, or that the Last Hour will ever come – even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, I would certainly find something even better there.’ His companion retorted, ‘Have you no faith in Him who created you from dust, from a small drop of fluid, then shaped you into a man? But, for me, He is God, my Lord, and I will never set up any partner with Him. If only, when you entered your garden, you had said, ‘This is God’s will. There is no power not [given] by God.’ Although you see I have less wealth and offspring than you, my Lord may well give me something better than your garden, and send thunderbolts on your garden from the sky, so that it becomes a heap of barren dust; or its water may sink so deep into the ground that you will never be able to reach it again.”²⁰

The affluent individual loses himself in his stupor of wealth and the ephemeral pleasure of gardens and wealth result in his eventual straying. Though one cannot presuppose that wealth and comfort always act as a catalyst for self-promotion and hedonism, what they ought to do is generate an acknowledgement of a higher power, Generous and Able, who affords to His creation the splendour they come to enjoy – “This is God’s will. There is no power not [given] by God.” The newfound freedoms of the 1960s or more presciently of our more contemporary time – technological advancements, ease of travel, of online shopping, of computer-generated realities – would draw marvel not exclusively at man’s achievement but instead and more applicably at the One who provided man with the ability, time, life and mind to pursue such endeavours. To demonstrate the ignorance of man descending into such self-fixation Allah reminds the reader that it is He who bestows – “For one of them We made two gardens” or “We had granted him such riches.”²¹ The Qur'an offsets the hubris that a Godless culture of self-autonomy can be predisposed to generate. A culture of unregulated power and independence is likely to draw man away from considering his or her temporalities – akin to Percy Shelley’s *Ozymandias*. In the poem the pharaoh’s words “Look on my works, ye mighty and despair!”²² are disastrously ironic as they fail to resonate; the bare and empty sand stretches far and wide and his magnificent “works” no longer exist.

Such a point is also noted by Sanchez De Toca who commented: “Affluence and secular culture provoke in consciences an eclipse of need and desire for all that is not immediate. They reduce aspiration toward the transcendent to a simple subjective need for spirituality, and happiness to material well-being and the gratification of sexual impulses.”²³ The non-immediacy De Toca draws on can stem from a lifestyle generated by individualistic self-sufficiency wherein facilitation of comforts and ease can buffer, only temporarily, the exposition of human vulnerabilities man is perpetually faced with. The man described in the Qur'an who was given two gardens is described as having betrayed his better conscience – “he wronged himself” – in part, by overlooking the palpable and most obvious. Muslim commentators explain that the abundance of fruit might symbolise “wealth, gold and silver,²⁴ that he believed “the garden will not be ruined and nor will it cease to exist”²⁵ and that he “lacked in certainty about the coming of the Hour.”²⁶ His fixation on his affluence was so great that he posited that the remarkable spectacle of growth and sustenance would not cease. He was amiss in considering that his fortune – a by-product of countless ecological happenings – could not have taken place independent of a higher power. The output of natural

growth of palm trees, rivers and fruits ought to have generated within him spiritual growth of gratitude and marvel at the workings of God. Secondly, so immersed in the spectacle, the affluent individual, parading a sense of self-entitlement believed that “I do not think this will ever perish, – or that the Last Hour will ever come— even if I were to be taken back to my Lord, I would certainly find something even better there.” The affluent individual’s friend reminds him of the basic, essential and existential questions he had failed to peruse – “Have you no faith in Him who created you from dust, from a small drop of fluid, then shaped you into a man?” The sequential happenings in his world is of paramount importance for reflection. Just like the man’s treasures are not the result of an instantaneous happening without cause and purpose and sequence, so too is man’s creation a reflection of cause and purpose. His friend’s advice is further purposed to instil in the affluent individual a sense of humility. The Qur’an reminds:

“Was there not a period of time when man was nothing to speak of? We created man from a drop of mingled fluid to put him to the test; We gave him hearing and sight.”²⁷

And:

“Mankind, what has lured you away from God, your generous Lord, who created you, shaped you, proportioned you.”²⁸

In the Qur’anic description from chapter 18 the affluent individual struts in his self-importance and is consumed by egotistic desire to propel his self-importance over and above his associate. That he is more affluent is his first assertion – the visually observed need be stated! And so too his following, his social networks, his clansmen of a greater number and social importance. The affluent individual felt safe in his prominence and his denial of the Last Hour speaks of a feeling of privilege in his self-sufficiency as he circumvents moral accountability through his denial of the Last Hour.

His example reveals that disbelief is not confined to a denial of the existence of God but also through a denial of a final judgement. Such a denial presupposes self-autonomy and deliberation outside of moral restraints that challenge and steer an individual into acceptable behaviours and practices. In the man’s attitude it is pride and vanity; these feelings of self-importance reflect the way he considered achievement and affluence a product of his own making, as if to say such deliberate effort on his part ought to bequeath moral laxity and freedom from anybody else’s involvement and oversight. Though he might concede the existence of a higher power, he does not acknowledge the sovereignty of that higher power nor feel challenged to observe moral restraints in recognition of impending accountability.

Though psychologists like Rollo May have long surmised that “Finding the center of strength within ourselves is in the long run the best contribution we can make to our fellow men”²⁹, the gluttonous individualism in the examples highlighted in Qur’an is the type that becomes antithetical to social interdependence and cuts at the values of humility, self-vulnerability and most importantly at the recognition of a higher power. Instead, it is the kind that breeds egocentric, atomistic and narcissistic self-superiority. Furthermore, though any correlation between affluence and irreligiosity can be attributed to a number of factors, what is suggested here is that feelings of self-sufficiency and autonomy have the potential to cloud a person’s realisation of existential factors of temporalities, spatial identities and purpose. To know that all that is experienced in life will one day come to an end should necessitate not only a self-questioning but also draw out feelings that correspond with appreciation and humility. It can appear that, in some cases, the affluent can in turn use not only their wealth as an indicator of fortuitous grace but can in turn position the religious as inherently less wealthy and seemingly dependent on metaphysical external factors – to the peril of material progress. Where the religiously minded are wont to reliance on a higher power such practice is judged by the faithless as stemming from a lacking in the locus of internal support; the comfort and privileges the affluent can enjoy arise from a deliberating on physical and material effort and its consequences. The faithless can unfairly presuppose about the religious a waning desire for material benefit and progress.

This, of course, is plainly unsupported. What the Qur'an offsets are examples of villainous hubris caused by such feelings of self-sufficiency by drawing on examples of individuals bestowed with wealth and power and whose privilege served to generate holistic enrichment as opposed to individualistic cravings. Such archetypes were cognisant of the workings of a higher power and were compelled by mind and conscience to exhibit gratitude for the comfort, security and wealth they were able to enjoy. The Prophet Sulayman (Solomon) for example once marvelled at the extraordinary happenings around him. Clearly a demonstration of his earthly authority and dominion it is in the recognition that such feats are no cause to relish in self-indulgence but instead to show recognition to the Provider and Bestower that is reflected beautifully.

“When Solomon saw it set before him, he said, ‘This is a favour from my Lord, to test whether I am grateful or not: if anyone is grateful, it is for his own good, if anyone is ungrateful, then my Lord is self-sufficient and most generous.’”³⁰

All humans of course – atheists, nonreligious and religious – experience emotions at what is beautiful or inspiring. Research conducted by Jesse Preston Fatih Shin, has shown that the nonbelieving and nonreligious are deeply moved by moments of awe and beauty with common themes directed at nature and humanity, just as religious people are.³¹ It is not that atheists or the faithless are indifferent to all that is good. The Qur'an posits impediments to a recognition of truth, and highlights affluence as one such potential impediment. What affluence ought not to do is not only undercut social interdependence but more pressingly to undercut dependence on the Provider and Sustainer of all. As Nicolas Baumard points out, psychology research shows that “Affluence also allowed more time for existential pondering: maybe we have some greater moral responsibility; perhaps life has a purpose.”³²

It is to be noted that affluence does not predispose arrogance and disbelief. Not all wealthy people are dissuaded from acknowledging and worshipping God due to ease and comfort facilitated by affluence. It is also difficult to ascertain a generic correlation between affluence and atheism both in relation to individual wealth and aggregate wealth. Some of the wealthiest and poorest nations have very low reported rates of atheism but there are instances, times and places in which such a correlation exists. The Qur'an draws on examples of affluent believers and disbelievers and highlights that the way one perceives of himself, his world, and his wealth is the greatest determinant. As noted, it warns of behavioural patterns of pride and egoism which can breed ingratitude, self-grandiosity and disbelief in a person.

“When We give people a taste of Our blessing, they rejoice, but when something bad happens to them- because of their own actions- they fall into utter despair. Do they not see that God gives abundantly to whoever He will and sparingly [to whoever He will]? There truly are signs in this for those who believe.”³³

This article has shown that the Qur'an identifies man's transgression as a consequence of his inner malaise. The examples highlighted reflect a wilful ignorance associated with rejection of God and generated by feelings of pride and self-autonomy. In a very telling verse, the Qur'an explains:

“But man exceeds all bounds when he thinks he is self-sufficient.”³⁴

In challenging the pseudo self-autonomy of man the Qur'an reminds its readers that people reach particular beliefs and behaviours as a result of what has not been corrected in their internal state. As shown, feelings of self-superiority, of egocentric hubris, have a damaging effect on one's mind and actions and the Qur'an consequently reminds us that man's tragedy is in foregoing the checking and remedying of this internal state, what the Qur'an figures as the most essential part of the human self.

The Qur'an for example stresses on the imperative for self-purification and situates this, at one point, in immediate relation to an obstinate arrogance exhibited by the ancient civilization of Thamud (8th century B.C). The initial verses draw attention to the human state:

“By the soul and how He formed it and inspired it [to know] its own rebellion and piety! The one who purifies his soul succeeds and truly lost is he who buries it [in darkness]. In their arrogant cruelty, the people of Thamud called [their messenger] a liar.”³⁵

The exposition of the initial verses set in place the condition of man as one bound by both positive and negative inclinations, and that the consequence of overlooking the imperative of seeking those virtuous inclinations and instead flaunting indifference can result in the “arrogant cruelty” the subsequent verse underlines. Such a structural ordering in the verses is profound in its instructiveness. Allah also reminds us that like any nation, the Thamud vanished in the passing of time. All of the opulence and grandiosity came to a sudden end, and all humans will undergo the same fate. It is therefore a display of delusory mindlessness that anyone struts in the pretence of self-sufficiency. Through an acknowledging of one’s weak and humble origin, one’s utter dependence and the inevitability of death the Qur’an calls us to consider the majesty of God:

“People, it is you who stand in need of God – God needs nothing and is worthy of all.”³⁶

The Qur’an reminds us that it is through internalising this true reality of ourselves and the human condition that the human can overcome such short-sightedness that betrays his better self. An acknowledgement and appreciation of God however, will engender divine mercy and guidance and call on us to be in awe of His Majesty, to effectively engage in the world around us in relation to a newfound cognisance of the signs and wonders which each remind us of His presence.

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